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SUBJECT: Elections in Chile: Media Impact on Public Opinion

11. SUMMARY: Despite extensive and well-developed media in Chile, there is little evidence that it has played a large role in shaping public opinion in the national elections of 2009. While even-handed coverage of the main presidential candidates is indicative of a healthy and free press in democratic Chile, it also suggests that the Chilean news media do not have a specific agenda to influence votes. The rise of social media such as Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, and Twitter as electoral media tools has been an innovation in the 2009 contest. This is an important first for Chile and reflects an assessment by the candidates and their teams about the importance of the youth vote and the need to reach out to first-time voters. Strict legal limits on political advertising do result in an effort to gain press coverage by the staging of "events" and personal appearances to draw publicity. Television advertising is especially tightly controlled and exists only in electoral spots called franjas electorales which are permitted in highly structured time segments and formats beginning 30 days prior to the election. Although journalists say that once the first round of voting concludes and the candidates for the second round are known, there will be a renewed media push to do more in-depth reporting on the contenders, it appears unlikely that, with the exception of the need to keep their faces before the public, media coverage and opinion will significantly influence Chilean public opinion and the outcome of the election. END SUMMARY.

12. The response of the Chilean electorate to press coverage and press opinion is decidedly different from that of many other countries. Despite an extensive and well-developed media spectrum in Chile, the news media are not widely considered to play a large role in shaping public opinion in the national elections. Most experts believe that informed audiences, who are the primary consumers of print, TV, and radio political reporting, are fixed in their positions on the political spectrum and that media coverage has not been and will not be a factor that changes voting patterns, particularly among older, experienced voters.

13. Chile has a robust and professional fourth estate. Multiple national and local media outlets have carried extensive coverage of the presidential election campaign over the last year, with print and electronic media playing a key role in providing information about the candidates and their platforms. During the past year, the three principal candidates -- Sebastian Pinera, Eduardo Frei,

and Marco-Enriquez-Ominami -- have appeared in news reports and editorials thousands of times each. Even Communist Party candidate Jorge Arrate, whose candidacy remains a distant fourth, has been able to achieve reasonable and non-polemic coverage. Clearly, while coverage totals have varied from month to month, no single candidate has dominated the media notably, with the possible exception of a slight edge for Pinera, which is understandable given his position as consistent front-runner in the opinion polls.

14. The even-handed coverage of the main presidential candidates is indicative of a healthy and free press and suggests that, with the exception of op-eds and other punditry, the Chilean news media do not have an aggressive agenda to influence votes. While most media outlets, particularly newspapers, have an editorial position that favors more conservative status-quo politics and candidates, the young, media-savvy, left-of-center newcomer Enriquez-Ominami has been able -- despite controversial positions on issues such as gay marriage and drug use -- to gain significant positive coverage for his candidacy, even in more conservative publications. Although some experienced political observers see darker underlying patterns in media coverage (for example, hyping the activities of one candidate during the time of political polling to detract public attention from another), no media blackout or unfair coverage of any of the candidates is apparent to most fair-minded observers.

15. The ascent of social media such as Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, and Twitter as electoral media tools has marked the 2009 Presidential contest. This is an important first for Chile and reflects the candidates' assessment that the youth vote matters and they to reach out to first-time voters. In a November article, noted Chilean journalist and sociologist Arturo Arriagada offered his analysis of the success of the presidential candidates in exploiting the new media. According to Arriagada, among the four social networks studied -- -- Pi????era leads with more than 66,000 followers on Facebook; 22,000 on Twitter; and 162 videos on YouTube, although Enriquez-Ominami has the highest number of views on YouTube. Enriquez Ominami is also the frontrunner in Twitter postings, and the most photos on Flickr. Far behind in their use of social media are Frei and Arrate, who have not been able to attract audiences with their online presence. The November 16 TV debate garnered unexpected interest among users of Twitter in Chile. Immediately prior to the debate, the debate was among the top 10 "trending topics" in the country and during the debate itself, was one four most followed topics. The impact of the social media on the final outcome remains to be studied but their entrance into the political arena as a new tool of persuasion is unlikely to diminish or disappear.

16. Although the perception among informed observers and political scientists is that the media have little real impact on voting patterns during the presidential elections, the candidates devote large amounts of time to organizing public events and making themselves available to the media for interviews and comment. This openness and reach for media coverage may, in part, be due to the unusually strict legal limits on political advertising. No political advertising is permitted in the mass media until one month prior to the election. Beginning 30 days prior, all licensed broadcast television stations are required to air electoral spots (francas electorales, produced by the campaigns for their candidate much in the manner of U.S. electoral advertising). Even the manner of broadcast of the francas is carefully controlled and balanced to prevent any candidate from gaining an advantage and to reduce the power of money on the purchase of television advertising. For example, two 20-minute segments of francas are aired daily at specified times. One is dedicated to the presidential candidates, who are each allotted five minutes of air time, and the other to Congressional candidates. Political advertising on radio and in print media, meanwhile, is less controlled and may be purchased like any other advertising, and there are no spending limits once the 30-day period commences. Still, the paucity of paid political advertising in print and radio suggests that even media consultants are dubious about the ability of advertising anywhere to sway political positions in Chile. In fact, in a November 20 national

poll, nearly half (46 percent) claimed that not even electoral franjas would not sway their decision for President.

17. COMMENT: In the final weeks before the first round of the presidential election on December 13, Chilean media continue to cover the candidates in their respective campaigns but the volume of reporting has decreased and coverage has a decidedly "tired" quality to it, perhaps a reflection of the campaigns themselves. Privately, journalists say that, once the first round of voting concludes and the two candidates for the second round are known, there will be a renewed push to do more in-depth reporting on the contenders. It appears unlikely that, with the exception of the publicity factor, media coverage or opinion will be significantly influential on the outcome of the election. Still, with gains from political advertising so limited, both candidates will feel the need to maintain highly visible public profiles to keep their faces and programs before the electorate. In spite of the assessment that the media is not hugely influential once the voter reaches the voting booth, no candidate is willing to forego daily coverage, and the more media exposure, the better. END COMMENT.
SIMONS